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On Zangwill's Aesthetic Theory of Art

Art and Beauty. The most basic grasp of either keeps them logically separate: beautiful objects certainly can exist independent of art, and artistic creations need not be beautiful. One is likely to note this separation and warn against conflating the two on the first day of an introductory class on aesthetics. But if there is indeed a problem in conflating the two notions, then why do we have to fight it so, and why then do theories of art seem again and again drawn to talk of beauty as proverbial moths to the flame? There is of course a considerable tradition that would suggest there is no deep problem after all, at least if one is careful to broaden the notion of beauty to some reasonably broad conception of the aesthetic, and if one suggests a relation looser than that of identification. In the twentieth century, that tradition includes the dominant philosopher of art of his time, Monroe Beardsley,¹ and, before him, Clive Bell,² whose theory held immediate and perennial appeal to visual artists. And now, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, there have been two major new book-length efforts to revive an aesthetic theory of art, those of Gary Iseminger³ and Nick Zangwill.⁴ This essay will examine some of the central aspects of Zangwill's theory.

¹ Monroe Beardsley, *Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1958), and in a series of articles over the following two decades.

² Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1914).

³ Gary Iseminger, *The Aesthetic Function of Art* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004).

⁴ Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

The inclination toward connecting the artistic with the beautiful, or at least with the aesthetically valuable, seems reasonable enough. After all, prior to certain odd and indeed controversial works of the twentieth century, it was the aesthetic nature of certain human artifacts that seemed most plausibly to unite them under a single rubric as works of art. One cannot but note the presence of valuable aesthetic qualities in both the Paleolithic frescoes at Lescaux and in the jamb figures on Chartres cathedral, in a Ming Dynasty porcelain and in a jazz standard by Thelonius Monk. Nor do the aesthetic features presented seem peripheral to their being artistic. Instead, many would say that their aesthetic natures seem to be at the very heart of what makes these and other things art. It seems that one can find and explain the importance and value of the art itself in the aesthetic aspects we find within. Break the bond between art and the aesthetic, some would say, and one may not be able to make sense of art as the vital cultural universal that it clearly is.

It is in this spirit that Zangwill begins his book by eschewing the question “What is art?” because it

invites us to speculate on what works of art have in common and when they differ from other things . . . [and] to conceive of the project of understanding art as being about finding a description that snugly fits all and only those objects and events that are art.⁵

For “What is art?” Zangwill prefers a substitute that might be framed as “Why is art? – Why does it matter to us? What is important about the creative and appreciative activities associated with art? What makes them, in Zangwill’s words, “rational and worthwhile.” How do we explain our attitudes and behaviors regarding art? In essence, Zangwill wishes to get at the nature of art by first seeking an explanation of the role it plays and value it contributes to our lives.

The unhappiness that Zangwill expresses with the existing state of art theory, the frustration that it does not address this explanatory role, is in important respects very well taken, though I think not exactly for the reasons he cites. On Zangwill’s view, art theory went wrong in the second half of the twentieth century when it sought to serve the god of extensional adequacy, when it designed itself to provide definitions of art that could accommodate the most controversial of the Western artworld’s avant garde works. Zangwill takes this to be a problem of taking the extensional adequacy of a theory (the “snug fit” of the theory to all art objects) too seriously and, in particular, of setting extensional adequacy above the goal of explanatory understanding. However, as I will argue later, I do not share Zangwill’s apparent belief that it is necessary to dismiss the goal of extensional adequacy in the pursuit of explanation of art and its activities. In fact, without properly accounting for all works (even the most controversial

⁵ Ibid., 1.

of the avant garde), one's explanation will fail. At best, it will be incomplete; at worst, it will explain some other thing than art.

Nonetheless, it certainly seems true that, as Zangwill argues, the most dominant and influential contemporary theories of art have fallen short in providing any explanation of the nature and commonality of artistic activities. The problem is a deep and almost certainly a fatal one. Institutional theories, starting from George Dickie's,⁶ were designed in the first place as a response to two challenges: (1) Weitz's rejection of definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, and, more importantly, (2) providing a definition that could accommodate the contemporary avant garde in the visual and performing arts. Zangwill is probably also right that, in using the latter as a starting point for constructing a theory, institutional theories were bound to produce a distortion in the grasp of art and artistic activities. And the distortion might indeed explain why the institutional (and related) theories are inherently unsatisfying. For one thing there is a problematic focus on what might be anachronistically labeled "court art", or fine or high art, or art with a capital "A," as against art more broadly (and indeed properly) understood. Consider that institutional theories have fundamental problems relating the works that fit within their theory to the central art works of other cultures. This is not a new complaint of course, having become visible in early concerns about the purported circularity of defining art relationally in terms of the actions of persons engaged in production, interpretation, appreciation, and criticism of works of art (the characteristic activities, that is, of members of the artworld). If one tries to keep the aesthetic out of this story and identifies those activities as just those that the Western artworld just happens to have arrived at today, then "artworld" just becomes a name for a unique and specifically Western institution plus whatever works of other cultures that institution happens to find amenable. But then that will entail that some non-Western cultures do not produce works of art at all, except insofar as and until the West embraces them. Hence the theory no longer appears to be an account of what we thought it was or, indeed, even what some institutional theorists themselves thought it was. As a consequence, such a theory lacks the capacity to explain why it seems reasonable to believe that fundamentally the same concept (art) applies to objects from other cultures.

Institutional (and indexical, narrativist, and historicist) theories at heart rely on the assumption that works of art bear essential relations *to other works of art*, and that the concept's attribution is understandable in terms of such relations. But, as Zangwill properly points out, "there must be some cases where art identity is not relational in this way," since the relations themselves can only carry the burden they must "because there are other

⁶ For several different formulations of Dickie's Institutional Theory, see these books of his: George Dickie, *Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971); idem, *Art and the Aesthetic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974); and *The Art Circle* (New York: Haven, 1984).

works of art that do not depend on any others.”⁷ Hence, the problem raised by the presence of art in other contemporary cultures is also apparent in the struggle such theories faced with regard to what is sometimes called first art, the work of artists that predate the institution, or that began the narrative or the history that has since the Enlightenment become a distinctively recognizable Western institution. Zangwill holds that an appropriate theory of any *x* should “explain much that we independently believe about *x* things” and, since, he thinks (correctly) that we independently believe that some Paleolithic cave paintings and the aesthetic creations of other cultures are works of art, we ought minimally to require that our theory of art explain such beliefs. His theory reasonably enough takes such a project as primary.

So, Zangwill rejects the focus on “extensional adequacy”⁸ that is characteristic of institutional and related theories, and settles on a theory of art that in the first instance *explains* art, one that makes sense of our more universally conceived artistic activities. The source of that explanation is what Zangwill views as art’s aesthetic purpose, specifically that art is fundamentally aesthetic creation. Broadly speaking, the aesthetic creation theory that develops from this kind of explanation lies in the family of aestheticist theories of art. Like Beardsley’s and Iseminger’s aestheticist theories, Zangwill takes art to have an aesthetic purpose. But Zangwill’s analysis differs from Beardsley’s both in embracing the intrinsic, not instrumental, value of the aesthetic, and in (more importantly) narrowing the field of aesthetic qualities to only those that relate “intimately” to measures of beauty and ugliness. And it differs from Iseminger’s view in several respects as well: On the one hand it analyzes aesthetic qualities in a more traditional (though restricted) Sibleyan fashion, rather than Iseminger’s reduction of the aesthetic to a type of second order appreciation and, on the other, Zangwill takes art’s aesthetic purpose to be reflected in individual acts of artistic production rather in the general practice of art, as Iseminger would have it.

Works of art here are all, and only, those artifacts possessed of aesthetic qualities, and that were created with the intention and understanding that producing those aesthetic qualities occurs by means of the production of certain appropriate non-aesthetic ones. The artist/producer thus must have had, in Zangwill’s words, the “insight” that the aesthetic qualities depend (supervene) on the relevant non-aesthetic qualities, and the artist/producer must have been acting on an understanding of that relationship.⁹ *That* is aesthetic creation, and *that* is the essence of art.

This analysis *explains* our interest in artistic activities and creation because the production of and acquaintance with aesthetic qualities amounts to production and experience of things that are intrinsically

⁷ Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, op. cit., 10.

⁸ In particular, what this rejection means is that he rejects the requirement that the extension of the definition must include all works of the avant garde.

⁹ Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, op. cit., 36–38.

valuable. It is reasonable, of course, to believe that it is worthwhile to stand in such a relation to objects of value. In contrast, an institutional approach (say, in terms of Dickie's initial notion of the "conferring of status") leaves entirely unanswered *why* one would or should care about engaging in the institution either as a producer or consumer. As Richard Wollheim pointed out, it is the reason for conferring status, the "why," that both calls for analysis and holds the key to the nature of art itself.¹⁰

However, there are several things in Zangwill's aesthetic theory that even those with sympathy for aestheticist approaches might find most unfortunate. The most obviously problematic element in his theory is the presumed nature of aesthetic creative thought and the intention that goes with it.

Why would one not want to embrace this understanding of creative intention and its attendant characterization of a work of art? Depending on how it is read, it is apparently both too narrow to account for even mainstream works of art, and at the same time so broad that ordinary acts that would seem to be quite distinct from art now must be considered fully works of art. Art, on this view, will extend to an enormously expanded range of activities and objects that, while they share a certain feature with paradigm works of art, surely fall short of being art.

Zangwill embraces this expansion of art, and comfortably asserts that such mundane creations and creative activities as doodles and doodling, furniture arrangement, cake decoration, dressing oneself, etc., if they are the result of the proper mental activity, are properly considered art. That is, if they are made with "aesthetic concern," as the theory fleshes that out, they can satisfy his aesthetic theory and thus constitute art works. So classifying any of these activities is potentially problematic, but let's consider the example of doodling. Suppose we take seriously that "aesthetic concern" here is to be understood as a matter of acting on what Zangwill characterizes as "aesthetic insight," that is, that the maker knows that an aesthetic quality will emerge from the presence of certain specific nonaesthetic ones. As I will argue below, that requirement is almost certainly too high a standard. But, even given that lofty standard, the following must now constitute a work of art: I sit in a class on an assignment to evaluate a colleague's teaching and, out of boredom, I stop taking notes and begin scribbling along the margins of my legal pad. I notice that I have penciled three vertical lines at the left margin and, an inch to the right of them, drawn a pair of parallel lines of similar length. I then add a third line to the right out of some vague inclination to satisfy my interest in symmetry or balance. That act of adding the final line was done with aesthetic insight as defined, and hence the resultant doodle was art. But that just too deeply violates what I take to be a widely shared intuition (skepticism about the significance of intuition aside) about the nature of art.

On the other hand, the aesthetic analysis Zangwill provides is also too narrow to account for mainstream works. The aesthetic insight, trivial as it

¹⁰ Richard Wollheim, *Art and Its Objects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Second Edition, 1980).

seems in the example I just gave, is simply too much to ask of most artists. Recall that an artist, on Zangwill's view, must intend and understand that her production of aesthetic qualities occurs by means of the production of certain appropriate non-aesthetic ones. Zangwill:

[It] is not enough that aesthetic properties *do* depend on nonaesthetic ones, the producer of art must also believe that they do.

and

[In] artistic activity, there is an intention that by creating an object or event with certain nonaesthetic properties, certain aesthetic properties will be produced. The existence of such an intention or set of intentions ... is essential for something to be a work of art.¹¹

It is obvious why this seems far too strong, even to the author himself, and he then allows that "Things can go wrong" either by the artist getting the relationship between the nonaesthetic and aesthetic wrong, or by bungling the production of the base nonaesthetic properties. Yet he insists that even the most messed up works of art must get something right about this relationship – "*some significant proportion* of aesthetic intentions must be successfully executed."¹²

Of course one can stipulate such a thing, but it is not at all apparent why anyone would believe it. After all, given the laughable nature of some attempts at poetry (for example my own, or ones to be found in the volume of poems in the book *Bad Art*¹³), if any aesthetic quality emerges at all it is as likely to be that of silliness or clumsiness, and would not include even a single aesthetic quality that the poet could reasonably be thought to have been intending. Consider, for comparison, bad arguments: it is not the case that they all must work to some extent to be considered arguments at all, so that poor deductive arguments all turn out to be some sort of reasonable inductive ones. All that is required in logic texts is purported premises and conclusion, and strength of the claimed relation between them be signaled by means of some commonplace linguistic indicators.

But there are deeper puzzles in Zangwill's expectations for artists, namely that all artists must believe (a) that aesthetic properties supervene on nonaesthetic ones, and (b) that certain aesthetic properties (the ones that are to be found, or at least intended to be present in the work) arise out of precisely those nonaesthetic features that the artist places in the work. My own experience teaching creative visual and performing artists is that it is simply false that most or even many possess any self-conscious or other awareness or belief about the relation between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic. Many seem just to be aiming at certain aesthetic qualities directly, if aiming at them at all. Imagine an experienced dancer who moves gracefully across the stage: While one may reasonably judge

¹¹ Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, op. cit., 40.

¹² Ibid., 41 (italicized in the original).

¹³ Quentin Bell, *Bad Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

that this specific gracefulness is a function of various aspects of her limb positioning, the erectness of her posture, and the motions her body makes along the way, it does not seem plausible that she is intending the specific quality of gracefulness to arise because of those particular mechanics, or that she believes that (or even recognizes) the detailed specifics of those mechanics that uniquely produce the gracefulness of her gait. She is far more likely not to have any beliefs about such matters at all; she just moves with grace. Artists, one may assume, often just create, absent cognitive or other understanding of how the aesthetic qualities of their works do ultimately emerge. Further, it is no insult to artists to think of them as less than philosophically informed about such relationships, or as failing to hold cognitive beliefs about them.

Moreover, if such aesthetic insight was after all a precondition of artistic activity, then a related problem arises. Suppose someone copies a scene in nature that she finds interesting, and does so just because of finding it interesting and in total absence of any explicit cognizance of its aesthetic nature, nor any sense of the relation between the aesthetic and nonaesthetic properties to be found there. Suppose at the same time that the natural scene is in fact rich with aesthetic properties. On Zangwill's view, the drawing, though it might capture all the aesthetic richness of the observed scene, could not be a work of art *because* the creator (by hypothesis) fails to have anything close to aesthetic insight. Knowing this, perhaps out of some conception of the role of originality in art, or out of an extended application of an exclusion of forgeries as art, certain art theories might preclude such an imitative drawing from being a work of art and, with it, its creator from being an artist. That creates a problem for such theories as well as for Zangwill's since it looks as though it will be, in principle, impossible to determine (barring detailed information regarding the creator's state of mind) whether any work is to count as a work of art. It will never be clear whether the presence of the aesthetic properties we observe in the work made their way there because of the artist's insight. To make matters even worse, Zangwill ups the ante and insists that artistic insight not consist of a mere understanding and intention that the aesthetic properties arise from the relevant nonaesthetic ones, but that such insight must not come to the artist as a result of perceiving some actual thing that has those nonaesthetic properties. The insight must itself be some sort of *new* perception, "either ... a vision of a non-actual thing with the aesthetic/nonaesthetic property combination or ... an actual thing that lacks those properties."¹⁴ The requisite level of creativity is both extraordinarily high and, in the final analysis, unverifiable. One is left to wonder how, given this criterion, we will ever be justified in believing we are in the presence of a work of art?

There is much else of considerable interest that could be taken up with respect to Zangwill's essential claims. For example, there is the connection

¹⁴ Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, op. cit., 43.

he draws between functionalism and evaluation that is taken to entail the impossibility of any adequate descriptive/non-evaluative theory of art. But, do functionalist accounts necessarily rule out the possibility of pure descriptive theory? One can find plausible descriptive analyses of law in some legal positivist accounts that both lack evaluative implications and that manage at the same time to account for law's underlying social function.¹⁵ Thus, to use a simple example, one might identify social order as a function of all legal systems, without implying that every law in any particular system must be just (or even orderly).

Three further questions arise about Zangwill's particular functionalist explanation of art: (1) Why ought one accept his assumption that there need be any single, univocal explanation for the fact that we "desire and value making and experiencing art?" (2) Why limit this explanation to the aesthetic aspect of the arts? And (3) Why understand the aesthetic in a manner that apparently excludes the cognitive and emotionally expressive as potential elements of the aesthetic? However, I leave these questions to focus the last part of my discussion on revisiting the importance of extensional adequacy and Zangwill's handling of avant garde art works.

Zangwill does not completely deny the significance of extensional adequacy. It is more that, given a choice between extensional adequacy and explanatory illumination, he argues that the latter trumps the former. The problem with contemporary theories that arose out of Danto's talk of the artworld is that they rest on intuitions that are confused, intuitions that unreflectively embrace all avant garde works (by this, Zangwill has in mind specifically Dadaist and Conceptual Art) as legitimate art works, intuitions that Zangwill says "have been corrupted by their theories."

But, of course, not all persons who hold the view that such avant garde works are legitimate also embrace those artworld and institutional theories. So it is unreasonable to dismiss their inclusion as merely a result of falling under the spell of Danto's or Dickie's theories.¹⁶ If there be any corruption at work here, it is certainly not just by virtue of including such works, but (as mentioned earlier) by taking them to be *paradigms* of artistic activity, an error more plausibly attributed to the theories themselves. The theories do sometimes appear to use avant garde works as their starting point, as capturing the essence of art.

There is, moreover, an inherent worry when it comes to rejecting any avant garde movement in the wholesale way Zangwill does. After all, many new genres in the arts are initially dismissed as beyond the pale only to eventually become a central part of the standard canon. Laypersons are often stunned to discover that their favorite works, works they even take to be paradigmatic of artistic excellence, had at first been critically derided as

¹⁵ An example might be H. L. A. Hart's analysis, as he presents it his postscript to *The Concept of Law*, Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

¹⁶ Just as one should equally resist the temptation to argue that Zangwill's *exclusion* of avant garde works is merely driven by his own dedication to a particular sort of aesthetic theory.

anything but art. Popular opinion aside, it is worth noting that classic Dada ready-mades (a particular object of Zangwill's scorn) are now considered among the most influential artworks of the twentieth century.

It would seem that an ideal reconciliation in all of this might be to find a way to include such works as art in a way that is compatible with a fundamentally functionalist/aesthetic account, i.e., one that has explanatory power. Obviously, that is too big a task for this short essay, but I would like to make a couple of proposals for understanding the avant garde that Zangwill does not (and would not) consider.

Zangwill does pursue ways of accommodating avant garde works within his theory, but none seem at all satisfactory.¹⁷ Thus, he says that "almost all conceptual art has significant aesthetic aspirations." But even if that were so (and it is doubtful that it could be so in Zangwill's sense of "aesthetic"), he realizes that it would still would leave out such central works as *Fountain*, *L.H.O.O.Q.*, and *L.H.O.O.Q. Shaved*. He toys briefly with just leaving such works out, raising the option of a sort of rejectionism that he associates with Beardsley.¹⁸ In the end, Zangwill seems most comfortable with what he calls the Columbus strategy, whereby works like Duchamp's *Fountain* carry along with them the aesthetic properties of the everyday artifact that they appropriate (the urinal in this case, or the Brillo box in Warhol's famous work), as they recontextualize the artifact and make it into art of a new ("high") sort. But it is important to see this won't do *unless* Warhol's *Brillo Box* is now conceived as being possessed of *different* aesthetic qualities from an ordinary Brillo box, and Duchamp's *Fountain* possesses different aesthetic qualities from the very urinal that physically (with the exception of the signature, *R. Mutt*) fully constitutes it. After all, in neither case is it ever seriously thought by critics that the relevant qualities of the avant garde work, that the point of the work, can simply be identified with the very same qualities that the industrial designer came up with in designing the product. And, in any event, the aesthetic qualities of the industrial products *could not* be the same aesthetic qualities carried by Warhol's or Duchamp's work if we are to be able to attribute *aesthetic insight* to either artist. To meet Zangwill's standard of aesthetic insight, Warhol and Duchamp must, not only aim at the aesthetic/nonaesthetic relation, but the relation itself must not already be present in an existing object. But, of course, the Brillo box, just like the urinal, and any other such appropriated artifact, existed already as an actual object and presented precisely those aesthetic qualities in relation to its nonaesthetic ones.

How then could we construct a theory that is both extensionally adequate to the full range of contemporary arts and capable of serving broader explanatory demands? One would have to begin by broadening the

¹⁷ Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic Creation*, op. cit., 66–73.

¹⁸ It is worth noting that Beardsley was not completely rejectionist about avant garde works like these, as he had and used a broad enough conception of the aesthetic to admit some of them by virtue of their wittiness, for example.

scope of aesthetic properties, not of course by reflecting on the gleaming white porcelain of *Fountain*, but by including the aesthetic values found for example in literature. Perhaps we should reconsider Dadaist and Conceptual art as some sort of hybrid art form, and thus no longer be constrained by consideration of only *visual* aesthetic qualities. One must add, say, discursive and intellectual ones. It is only via stretching the art form in this way that Beardsley, for example, could allow the wit of some of these works to satisfy an aesthetic interest. I am with Beardsley on this. Such works certainly seem productive of aesthetic pleasures but they are ones that are more typically found in the discursive arts than the visual arts.

Alternatively (or additionally), one could simply allow that being a social practice is a central part of the story, *and* that artistic practices, like other human practices, can evolve. Such evolution can be for better or worse, of course. Even if a practice begins (or all artistic practices begin) with the unifying character of the aesthetic, it seems unnecessary and unrealistic to restrict later artistic development to the aesthetic. After all, persons can surely reasonably pursue other qualities of value and integrate those values into their practices. If so, an explanatorily adequate account of art need not rely solely on the aesthetic, narrow or otherwise. And, of course, human practices can also deteriorate in certain ways as well. The comparison to law might again be apt. One can recognize that for a legal system to exist it must serve a general goal of survival of the society (or at least some powerful segment of society), and go on to the conviction that such an aim is part of the essence of law, while still recognizing that some laws within every well-developed system will not have that direct aim. Thus laws that confer powers to make contracts or leave wills, or drive on the left or right side of the road, do not directly address the survival of society, and the choice of particulars in such cases can be perfectly arbitrary. And so long as the system taken as a whole serves the society's ends, the individual laws taken alone need not. Perhaps something like that applies to art as well.

Finally, many if not most societies have legal systems in which particular laws may actually be detrimental to overall survival – there are, after all, bad laws in well-functioning systems. There are also, of course, simply bad (or evil) legal systems. (Perhaps Dada and Conceptual art represent the beginnings of an artistic system gone somehow sour.) But, just as a proper description and explanation of law must be able to account for the full range of legal phenomena as well as for idealized legal systems, so must a proper description and explanation of art account for the complete range of artistic works and practices. The basic concern about Zangwill's theory is that it does not seem capable of accounting in the proper way for the full sweep of art. The theory indeed makes for a fine characterization of human aesthetic creation, broadly construed. But, despite the fact that many of the greatest works of art in every culture do seem to be aesthetic creations in the richest Zangwillian sense, the complete set of art works neither includes all aesthetic creations, nor are all members of that set aesthetic creations themselves.